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## On the Diffusion of Mithra Images in Sasanian Iran New Evidence from a Seal in the British Museum

by PIERFRANCESCO CALLIERI

A recent, unpublished dissertation (Callieri 1986) is devoted to an important and still little known class of materials, the seals from Afghanistan and the Northwest of the Indian subcontinent. Based on the seal-collections of the British, Victoria and Albert and Peshawar Museums, it shows the heterogeneous character of the seals collected in that area, which seems to reflect the character of local seal production in the historic pre-Islamic age. Along with seals produced locally, basically imitation of models imported from the West, we meet in the Gandharan area with Graeco-Persian, Roman, Sasanian and Gangetic seals.

The Sasanian seals make up 17.4% of the seals which were certainly collected in the Northwest; this total is reduced to 14.5% if we include in the calculation the items whose provenance is only presumed. Most of the Sasanian seals collected in the Northwest are in the Peshawar Museum and once belonged to Sir John Marshall when Director General of the Archaeological Survey of India. In the British Museum, most of the Sasanian seals from the Northwest are part of the Godwin-Austen collection, kept in the Department of Western Asiatic Antiquities and published by Prof. Bivar (Bivar 1969). A small group of eight unpublished Sasanian seals is today to be found in the British Museum's Department of Oriental Antiquities <sup>(1)</sup>: most of them belonged to other collections formed in Afghanistan or in the Northwest of the Indian subcontinent.

Among these last, there is one seal which attracted my attention for its iconography. It represents a possible new source for a largely debated but still unsolved question, that of the actual diffusion of the Mithra images in pre-Islamic Iran. I therefore deemed it useful, in the interests of a further iconological analysis, to publish it separately from my catalogue (Callieri 1986).

<sup>(1)</sup> I wish to take the opportunity here to express my most sincere thanks to W. Zwalf and J.R. Knox in the Department of Oriental Antiquities, for their liberality in giving access to the collection, their kind care and their support, which made the activity of documentation easy and pleasant. To W. Zwalf I owe also the revision of the English text. I acknowledge with thanks also the advice of Professors Gh. Gnoli, N. Parise and M. Taddei.

The seal in question bears the accession number OA 1932.5-17.1, and is stated in the register to have belonged to H. Nelson Wright. No information is available on its findspot, but its presence in the Department of Oriental Antiquities does not make improbable that the seal was, like most of the other seals in the same department, found in the NWFP.

It is a yellow chalcedony ellipsoid, pierced for stringing by a moderate perforation; the engraved surface is flat and the outline oval; the body of the ellipsoid is decorated with three parallel rows of disks in relief (fig. 1). The ellipsoid measures 2.2 cm. in height, while the engraved surface measures  $2 \times 1.7$  cm.

On top of a pyramidal mountain rendered by globular depressions, is the bust of a male deity to front, within a radiate halo, the head turned three quarters to right and looking towards a worshipper standing to front with outstretched arms and head turned in profile to the deity (figs. 2, 3).

The hair of the deity is short, formed by a series of fine lines on the head, while a plain diadem(?) surrounds the forehead. The deity wears earrings with a small bead and an oval pendant; a tunic with round collar (or a necklace?) and leaves with folds shown; on the chest a pendant(?) hangs from a large necklace. From behind the shoulders, two long, winding ribbons with widening at the extremities turn upwards. The left hand is kept to the chest, while the right, with extended forefinger, holds a spear(?) with pointed head. The halo encircling the bust is made up of a thin fillet, irregularly circular; from its outer edge, flame-like elements radiate all around the figure.

The worshipper has a disproportionately large head. A series of locks covers the head; two thin pigtails or ribbons(?) fall from the nape of the neck. The worshipper's earrings consist of two globular superimposed beads; his long tunic with round neck-opening and rounded lower edge at knee-height shows thin parallel and almost horizontal incisions for garment folds; his trousers are similarly marked and he wears high boots. Two pairs of thin ribbons appear at the side behind the waist.

The engraving is extremely accurate: all the elements of the image are smoothly joined and the details of the drapery and facial features finely incised. Stylistically, notwithstanding some incongruities in the proportions and in the position of the figures, there is a marked tendency towards a naturalistic rendering. Compare a group of Sasanian seals which Brunner calls 'naturalistic' (Brunner 1978: 131).

The Sasanian origin of the seal is confirmed by the shape of the ring (cf. Bivar 1969: 23-24; Brunner 1978: 25-33) and by the variety of stone (cf. Bivar 1969: 35; Brunner 1978: 45-47). Moreover Bivar considers pierced and decorated ellipsoids as shapes characteristic of the 4th and 5th centuries A.D.

The peculiar rendering of the undulating ribbons over the shoulder of the deity is a feature of Sasanian Iran and of neighbouring areas influenced by it. In Sasanian glyptic art we find it among others in the seal in the British Museum, Department of Western Asiatic Antiquities, representing the standing figure of Vahrām IV (fig. 4), dated by Bivar to the reign of that king, i.e. A.D. 388-99 (Bivar 1969: 56, no. 119352, BC1, pl. 4; Herrmann 1977: 112) and in a seal in the same collection,

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Fig. 1 - London, British Museum,  
Department of Oriental Antiquities:  
Sasanian ellipsoid seal-stone, inv. no.  
BM 1932.5-17.1 (photo P. Callieri).



Fig. 2 - The incised surface of the same seal  
(photo P. Callieri).

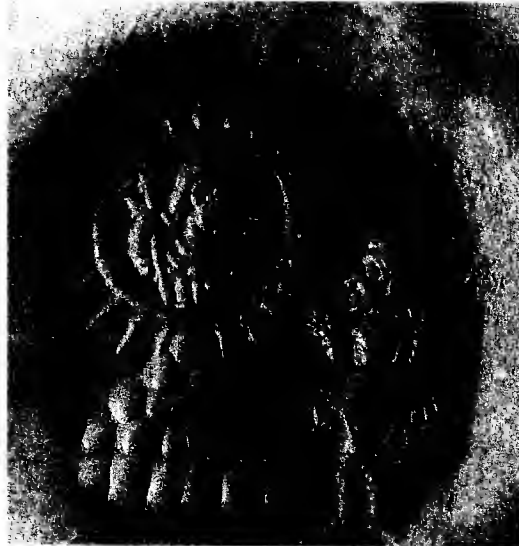


Fig. 3 - Impression of the incised surface (photo  
G. Silvestrini).

dated by Bivar to the 3rd-4th century A.D. (Bivar 1969: 62, no. 119611, CB3, pl. 7). On Sasanian silver, this motif appears on a ewer in Cleveland Museum (Lukonin 1976: figs. 186-87). In a more specifically outer Iranian area, we find it at Bâmiyân, both in the figurative paintings (Tarzi 1977: pl. D.53) and in the architectural decoration (*ibid.*: pl. D.43, pp. 95-96).

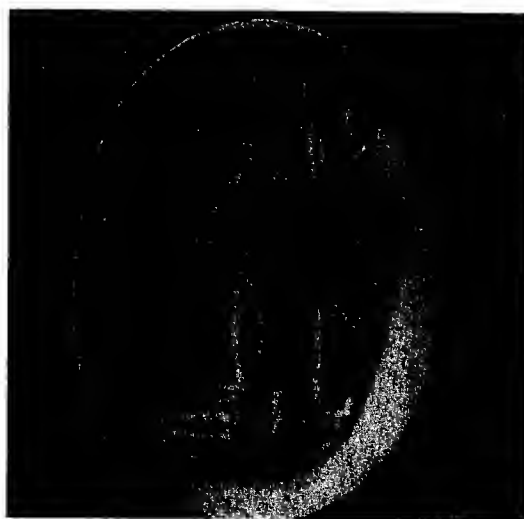


Fig. 4 - London, British Museum, Department of Western Asiatic Antiquities: 'Vahrām IV seal' (after Ghirshman 1962).

The worshipper's tunic is of a type frequent on Sasanian figures and always worn by male dignitaries of high rank. We may quote again the Vahrām IV seal, two more seals in the British Museum (Bivar 1969: 56, no. 119388, BC3, pl. 4; 56, no. 119601, BC4, pl. 4), a silver cup in Baltimore (Harper 1981: 119, fig. 36) or a Kushano-Sasanian plate in the British Museum (Harper 1981: 108-10, fig. 35; cf. Lukonin 1967: 27 ff.; Lukonin 1986: 148 ff.). It allows us to identify the worshipper as a male, even though the hair-style could at first have been interpreted as female.

Similarity with our seal is particularly evident in the Kushano-Sasanian plate and the Vahrām IV seal, where we also find the thin ribbons from behind the waist. Regarding the Vahrām IV seal, Herrmann remarks that what she calls 'apron shirt' came into fashion in the late 4th century, and this, as regards dating, seems to agree with the other features of our seal.

For the peculiar hair-style of the worshipper, we may compare a male bust with pointed beard and moustache, a diadem around the head and hair with single pigtail, on a Sasanian seal-stone in the British Museum (Bivar 1969: 52, no. 120218, AF1, pl. 2).

The pyramidal rendering of the mountain with globular rocky elements seems to belong to an Eastern Iranian-Indian domain. We find it on a carnelian seal-stone from the Masson collection (therefore probably from Afghanistan) in the British Museum which I attribute, on stylistic grounds, to the groups of Graeco-Persian seals engraved in the Gandharan area (Callieri 1986: no. 4.6). A stylized mountain symbol made up of three circles in a triangle is common on Indian coins of the early historic period, as at Taxila (Allan 1936: 223, pl. XXXII 21) or in the Śātavāhana coinage (Deo 1960: 139, no. 4, pl. VIII 4). In the Mesopotamian glyptic tradition, on the contrary, the mountain is usually rendered in an ellipsoidal shape of leaf-shaped elements (cf. Digard 1975: 287).

The iconography of our seal is unique among Sasanian seals. Other scenes of worship are limited to the probable figure of Anahita with smaller worshipper(?) (Bivar 1969: 63, no. 119358, pl. 7; Gignoux 1978: 60, no. 6.72, pl. XXI) or to the priests in front of the fire altar (cf. Bivar 1969: 56-57, pl. 5; Göbl 1973: 37, group 4; Frye 1973: 71; Brunner 1978: 65-66, no. 125, 52, 193; Gignoux 1978: 37, no. 4.39, 4.40, pl. XI).

The main interest of our seal lies in the deity, which we propose to identify with Mithra on the basis of the following observations.

The deity is enclosed within a radiate halo; the shape of the rays is flame-like and emphasizes the importance of the light emanating from the halo.

The radiate nimbus, in which the rays resemble spear-heads, is the iconographic element which characterizes the deity represented standing on an open lotus behind the king in the problematic rock relief (cf. Trümpelmann 1975; Azarpay 1982; Fukai et al. 1984; Tanabe 1985; Azarnoush 1989) with the investiture of Šābuhr II or Ardašīr II at Tâq-e Bostân (fig. 5). The identification of that deity as Mithra, proposed by F. Justi in 1904, has since then been universally accepted (cf. Christensen 1944: 255-56;



Fig. 5 - Tâq-e Bostân: Mithra (detail of the Sasanian relief with the investiture of Šābuhr II or Ardašīr II) (after Ghirshman 1962).

Frye 1978: 207; Carter 1981: 74; Fukai et al. 1984: 154-55; Ries 1990: 2765). Unlike our seal, Mithra at Tâq-e Bostân holds in both hands a *barsom* as a bundle of five thin branches tied together.

A similar deity, represented with radiate halo, Phrygian cap and long robe, appears in the reliefs of the sanctuaries founded by the Iranian dynasty of Commagene in the 1st century B.C. His identity is here guaranteed by the accompanying inscriptions. At Nemrud Dağ this deity is called Apollo-Mithras-Helios-Hermes; at Arsameia he is called Mithras-Helios-Apollo-Hermes in one relief, while another inscription speaks of Mithras-Apollo and (*kai*) Helios-Hermes (cf. Dörner & Goell 1963: 97-99, 222-24; Waldmann 1973: 110-11) <sup>(2)</sup>.

The radiate halo, however, is not the only element which links the deity on our seal with Mithra. The mountain on which he stands recalls the Iranian tradition of Mithra's birth on a mountain or in a mountain cave (cf. Hartman 1953: 59) and the god's attribute as *saxigenus* in western Mithraism (cf. Cumont 1896-99: 159 ff.), both deriving probably from the Mesopotamian Šamaš (cf. Hartman 1953: 59; Gnoli 1974: 29 ff., 37, 42, 43; cf. also Drijvers 1978 for a different opinion). The Mithraic iconography of the bust emerging from the rocks (cf. Cumont 1896-99: pls. 183, 187; Saxl 1931: 73-74, pl. 29, no. 161; Vermaseren 1960a: figs. 280, 321, 325, 379, 426, 454, 521, 522, 579, 596; Merkelbach 1984: pls. 46, 48, 106, 158) finds a correspondence in the Šamaš iconography at Hatra (cf. Ingholt 1954: 29, pl. VI 2; Tübach 1986: figs. 1-2) <sup>(3)</sup>. It is interesting to note that in the Indian tradition of the *Śamba-Purāṇa* too (cf. *infra*) the idol of the sun god was represented only down to the knee.

Our iconography, however, is best explained from the Avesta: from *Yasht* X, the *Mithr Yasht*, 50-51, in fact, we know that Mithra has an abode on Mount Harā, from which he guards humanity (cf. Gershevitch 1959: 98-99, 204-5; Zaehner 1961: 112-13; Thieme 1978: 504). In *Yasht* X. 102 Mithra is called 'the skilful warrior who has [...] pointed spears' (cf. Gershevitch 1959: 122-23), which seems to explain the god's attribute on our seal. The attribute in the right hand, in fact, has the appearance of a spear and is quite different from the *barsom* held by Mithra both at Nemrud Dağ and at Tâq-e Bostân (cf. Ghirshman 1962: 80, 190 ff.) <sup>(4)</sup>.

<sup>(2)</sup> The syncretism Mithras-Helios represents a confirmation of the solar character of Mithra, anticipating what will be the relation between Mithras and Sol in Roman Mithraism; in this regard the inscription on an altar of Roman age from the Piraeus, which assimilates Mithras to Helios, is noteworthy (Oikonomides 1975: 78).

<sup>(3)</sup> At a much earlier date, the Sargonic iconography of the sun god, characterized by rays issuing from his shoulders and by the posture with one foot upon a mountain, is shared also with Marduk (cf. Frankfort 1939: 95). The connection of Marduk with the mountain is evidenced by the episode of his 'burial' and liberation from the *Huršānu*, the 'mountain of the right decision' (cf. van Buren 1945: 8-9), which in glyptic art is rendered by the image of the god emerging from the mountain (cf. Frankfort 1939: pl. XIXa).

<sup>(4)</sup> In the Sasanian seals representing the cult of fire altars, the *barsom* held by the officiating priest or priests usually has the appearance of two parallel branches (Brunner 1978: 65, no. 125; Bivar 1969:

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In *Yašt* XIX. 35 Mithra is defined as 'the one who is the most richly endowed with *x<sup>v</sup>arənah*' and also in the *Great Bundahišn* XIV. 7-8 it is said that Mithra has the *xwarrah* (cf. Gershevitch 1959: 47). The association of *x<sup>v</sup>arənah*/*xwarrah* with fire and radiant light, demonstrated by Duchesne-Guillemin (1962: 203-4; 1963: 19-20) and Gnoli (1962: 98-99; 1974: 72-73, fn. 308, 313; 1984: 207-13) finds strong support in *Yašt* X. 127, where it is said that 'in front [*nixšata*] of him (= Mithra) flies the blazing Fire which (is) the strong Kavyan Fortune [*x<sup>v</sup>arəno*]' (cf. Gershevitch 1959: 137, 278, fn. 127<sup>5</sup>, 60). Even in the presence of other possible interpretations of the problematic *nixšata* (*ibid.*: fn. 127<sup>4</sup>), there can be no doubt as to the connection between *x<sup>v</sup>arənah* and fire. In the case of Mithra this seems to be confirmed also by *Yašt* X. 142, in which the god is said to be 'endowed with own light' (cf. Gershevitch 1959: 244-45, 31, 61). What could be a better figural representation for this quality than the rayed halo of our image? (for the other possible iconographies of *xwarrah* cf. Jacobs 1987; Gnoli 1989a: 150, fn. 26).

Thus the Avestan textual evidence seems to confirm the identification we propose. The presence in Eastern Iran of Avestan iconographies, demonstrated by F. Grenet for the Kushan period (cf. Grenet 1984: 255-56, 261; Gnoli 1989b) is therefore confirmed also for the Sasanian period.

Even though not the Sun himself, as, on the contrary, is Xwaršēd, post-Avestan Mithra assumes the character of a solar deity, to the extent of being identified with the Sun. In the western areas of Iran Mithra undergoes this process as a result of the influence of Mesopotamian Šamaš (cf. Cumont 1923: 11, Gershevitch 1959: 32, 104-5; Zaehner 1961: 110; Blawatsky & Kochelenko 1966: 6; Gnoli 1971: 245-46; Gnoli 1974: 37; Frye 1978: 65; Gnoli 1979: 732, 737). The testimony of Strabo on this point ([Πέρσαι] τιμῶσι δὲ καὶ ἥλιον, ὃν καλοῦσι Μίθρη, XV 3.13.732) is clear as are those of Ptolemy, *Tetrabiblon* II 17 and of Hesychius, *Lexicon s.v. Μίθρας* (cf. Clemen 1920: 34, 58, 89; Sundermann 1978: 499, fn. 83). As regards the Sasanian period, the Armenian and Syriac sources not only provide evidence of the predominant role of the Sun in the official cults of Sasanian Mazdaism, but even explicitly record his name as Mihr, the Middle Persian form of the name Mithra (cf. Christensen 1944: 144).

The importance of Mithra in Iranian religion is great (cf. Boyce 1969: 21 ff.), even though the occasions in which he is explicitly referred to are rather few (<sup>5</sup>).

57, no. 132513, pl. 5) even though in a seal of the 'outline' style (Brunner 1978: 65, no. 52) the priest on the right holds a *barsom* rendered with a single branch.

(<sup>5</sup>) In the Achaemenian period Artaxerxes II in his inscription at Susa invokes Anahita and Mithra after Ahura Mazda (cf. Kent 1953: 154-55, A2Sd; Vermaseren 1956: 46); at Hamadan he invokes the protection of Mithra alone (cf. Kent 1953: 155, A2Hb; Vermaseren 1956: 46); Artaxerxes III in a Persepolis inscription invokes Ahura Mazda and Mithra (cf. Kent 1953: 156, A3Pa; Vermaseren 1956: 47). In the Parthian period, the frequency of theophoric names deriving from that of Mithra (Frye 1963: 253-54) is a clear sign of the popularity of the god, and the same can be said of the Sasanian period (Frye 1975: 66). Hesychius in his *Lexicon* defines Μίθρης: ὁ πρῶτος ἐν Πέρσαις θεός (cf. Clemen 1920: 89). In



Although Iranian divine images are uncommon (cf. Herodotus 1, 131, 140; cf. *infra*), we may compare our seal with other images from Iran said to represent Mithra.

The identification of Mithra on a late Achaemenian rock relief at Qizqapan and on a Seleucid rock relief at Tang-i Sarvak is considered doubtful (Frye 1978: 205 f.).

A radiate deity on the coins of the Iranian king of Lycia Mithrapata ('protected by Mithra') of about 385 B.C. has been proposed as the earliest image of Mithra, because Mithrapata's lord, Artaxerxes II, was the first Persian king to mention Mithra and Anahita (Shahbazi 1985: 503). Mithra has been seen in the radiate deity on the coins of Meredates, king of Characene (*ibid.*). For Parthian Iran, a stone capital from Bard-e Nešândeḥ has been considered as representing Anahita and Mithra (Ghirshman 1978: 213). A Sasanian seal showing a male figure holding out a ring and carrying a branch has been interpreted by Ackermann as Mithra (Ackermann 1938-39: 800, pl. 256 B), and again the image of a horseman hunting an antelope, followed by a dog, on a carnelian in the Hermitage, has been considered by Lukonin to be Mithra (Lukonin 1986: 11). Lukonin (1969: 148) also sees Mithra in the enthroned figure in the upper register of the central roundel of the Kushano-Sasanian plate in the British Museum already mentioned (cf. Harper 1981: 108-10, fig. 35).

All these images have been identified as Mithra on rather subjective grounds. Among Sasanian seal-stones, however, we find icons whose proposed identification as Mithra is, in my opinion, more objectively based.

The first example is the radiate bust above a chariot drawn by winged horses <sup>(6)</sup> on a seal-stone in Berlin Museums (fig. 6), where the presence in the inscription of the personal name *hwmt̥ry* seems to confirm the reading of the iconography proposed by several scholars (Herzfeld 1920: 108, fig. 14; Combaz 1937: 189-90; Ackermann 1938-39: 790; Ghirshman 1962: 243, fig. 298; Shepherd 1983: 1100). Only Frye (1978: 210) denies this identification in a long and rather tortuous discussion intended to demonstrate that Mithra was not portrayed on seals and, more generally, that his only representation is at Tâq-e Bostân, owing to the special situation attached to that relief.

On the basis of their similarity with the Berlin seal, Mithra on the chariot has been identified on several seal impressions from the Late-Sasanian fortress of Ak-Depe, Turkmenistan: illustrations have not, however, been published (Gubaev 1971: 48-49; Lukonin 1971: 50; Gubaev 1989: 265).

Sasanian Iran, the sacred fire Vahrām, whose cult is attested by the *Ayādgār i Zarērān*, is linked with Verethragna, an aspect of Mithra (Pagliaro 1954: 6, 35); several solar symbols, such as the lion, the griffin, the winged horse, etc... have been interpreted as symbols of Mithra (Ackermann 1938-39; Porada 1962: 245) or indirectly of Verethragna (Ghirshman 1962: 229).

<sup>(6)</sup> It may be interesting to recall here the stone *astodân* from Bishapur: on one of its faces is represented a chariot drawn by two diverging winged horses, interpreted by Ghirshman as Mithra's chariot (Ghirshman 1962: 166, fig. 210).

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Fig. 6 - Berlin, former Kaiser Friedrich Museum:  
Sasanian seal with the inscription *hwmtry hy*  
*p'rsumy* (after Ghirshman 1962).



Fig. 7 - Paris, Cabinet des Médailles: Sasanian seal  
with the inscription *mtry yzdty* (after Gignoux  
1978).

Even more striking is the radiate head on a seal-stone in the Paris Cabinet des Médailles (fig. 7), surrounded by the inscription read by Gignoux as *mtry yzdty*, 'le dieu Mithra' (Gignoux 1978: 62, no. 1972.1317.45, pl. XXII, 6.84). As Gignoux makes clear, the reading of the inscription (which cannot be a personal name) seems to link the name of Mithra with the solar deity represented on the stone, and thus adds new evidence for the solar character of the god (*ibid.*: 5, fn. 1).

A third seal (fig. 8), in a private collection, which was described as representing a 'figure d'homme de face, assis sur un banc les jambes repliées sous lui(?) [...]' (Gignoux & Gyselen 1982: no. 10.19, pl. IV), seems to be related to our theme and identifiable as the frontal bust of Mithra with radiate halo, spear in the right hand, standing on a wheeled chariot seen from the side; the lion head decorating the chariot also suggests a Mithraic iconography.

Our seal in the British Museum, therefore, is not without parallels, and confirms the identification proposed for the other three. To these evidences in glyptic art, we must add the standing deity with radiate crown in an investiture scene beside a central fire altar on the reverse of a coin type of Hormizd I, identified as Mithra on the basis of the existence of a similar coin type showing Anahita; these two are moreover the only Zoroastrian deities attested in the official cult beside Ahura Mazda (cf. Lukonin 1967: 26, tab. 1; Rosenfield 1967: 119; Göbl 1968: 20, tab. II; Lukonin 1969: 102-3; Lukonin 1977: 180).

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Fig. 8 - Private collection: Sasanian seal (after Gignoux & Gyselen 1982).

It is nevertheless a fact that the icons of Mithra in Iran are very few. Why? The hypothesis that this is due to an iconoclastic tendency among Zoroastrians must be modified by Mary Boyce's studies on Zoroastrian iconoclasm: only statues in the round were actually forbidden, and then only in the Sasanian period; otherwise there is evidence for image worship throughout the history of pre-Islamic Iran (Boyce 1975a: 456; 1975b: 104, 111). In testimony to the diffusion of the sacred images, Boyce reports as a 'faint survival of the old icon cult [...] in connection with the worship of the much-loved Mihr' the fact that in the Yazdi region in some Muslim villages 'the face of the sun-god with radiate crown is still embroidered in traditional designs' (Boyce 1975b: 109).

The sparseness of Mithra images was also interpreted as evidence that the cult of Mithra was not widespread in Iran (cf. Frye 1978: 211), a suggestion which the evidence from the Roman empire wholly disproves. Given the difference between Iranian and Roman Mithraism, it is noteworthy that even in Rome, where Mithraism is so largely attested, its images were nevertheless completely absent from any official production, like coins, and appear only in private contexts. According to MacDowall, this can be explained by the fact that Mithras was the sacred name, to be used only by the initiated, deliberately hidden behind the other figure of *Sol invictus*, which

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was very popular on coins (MacDowall 1979: 568). Could this interpretation be valid also for Iran, where the discrepancy between the frequent occurrence of Mithra in inscriptions or symbols and the rarity of his images is so striking? Could there have been a mystery cult of Mithra in Iran also (Colpe 1975)? Evidence of a Mithra cult in a region of Iranian culture like Commagene around the 1st century B.C. is provided by the presence of the relief stele with Mithra beside the entrance to the rock-carved underground gallery and chamber in the Hierothesion of Mithridates I Kallinikos at Arsameia on the Nymphaios. The existence, at such an early date, of an architectural form subsequently developed in the Roman Mithraea and associated with an image of Mithra, has been interpreted as a beginning of the Mithraic mystery cults (Waldmann 1973: 148-49; for the problems raised by this hypothesis cf. Duchesne-Guillemin 1984: 17-18). In this respect, a particular significance attaches to Bivar's hypothesis, according to which the open hand, so common on Sasanian seals, could be linked with the cult of Mithra, in the way the clasping hand is important in Roman Mithraism (Vermaseren 1960b: 113-14). In the British Museum's collection of Sasanian seals, the only two inscribed seals among those with the open hand motif show names compounded with Mithra (Bivar 1969: 25).

Frye (1978) suggests that regions of Outer Iran, in which we also include Afghanistan and the Kushano-Sasanian Northwest, may provide new material for this problem.

Solar deities have a primary role in the religions of the area in which our seal was probably collected, i.e., Afghanistan or the Northwest of the Indian sub-continent. As regards the latter, we must remember that Iranian influences and, in particular, a direct Sasanian domination, have played a perceptible part in its cultural evolution. The importance of solar deities here has been stressed by several authors (cf. Humbach 1978: 234; MacDowall 1975, 1979) <sup>(7)</sup>. The cult of the sun god in Northern India is linked with Iran even in the Indian tradition which so rarely acknowledges outside influence. According to the *Sāmba-Purāṇa* and *Bhaviṣya-Purāṇa*, eighteen members of the Maga caste of Śākadvīpa, probably Sakastān = Sistan, migrated to India in order to devote themselves, as Brahmins, to the worship of the anthropomorphic image of a sun god named Mihira (cf. Jackson 1914: 210; Scheftelowitz 1933; von Stietencron 1966; Gershevitch 1975; Gail 1978: 339-41; Humbach 1978: 229).

<sup>(7)</sup> The most ancient representations of solar deities in Eastern Iran are those on the Graeco-Bactrian coins of the second half of the 2nd century B.C. On a coin of Plato (Bivar 1979: 742, fig. 1; Serdityh 1986) we see a solar chariot with a radiate deity. On another coin of Hermaeus in Kabul Museum (Bivar 1979: fig. 5) is a divine portrait wearing a Phrygian cap with solar rays. These images have been identified by Bivar as the earliest evidences of a cult of Mithra, in which the sun-chariot would represent a syncretistic element from the iconography of Apollo (Bivar 1975: 279; 1979). The fact that the images are uncaptioned, however, makes the identification only a possible one (cf. MacDowall 1979: 562; Shahbazi 1985: 503), and does not exclude seeing in them general images of the sun god.

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The problems connected with the different interpretations of this tradition are less relevant to our present purpose than the evidence, in post-Śaka Northern India, for an image of a sun god of Iranian origin, called Mihira.

The relationship of this sun god with Mithra is however made more complex by the fact that according to the *Bṛhat-Saṃhitā* (58, 46-48) the image of this sun god should wear Northern dress, a prescription reflected in the iconography of Sūrya. The description in al-Istakhri of the seated Multan idol also corresponds to the iconography of Sūrya (cf. Elliot & Dowson 1867: 27 ff.). We find therefore an apparent contradiction between the name of the sun god in the sources quoted above (Mihira) and the appearance in the iconography of a god called Sūrya. There is, however, clearly a connection between the two.

In the Kushan world Mithra as such is present on the reverse of the coins of Kanishka and Huviška with the Bactrian legend MIPO or MIOPO. On the issues of Kanishka he is represented as a diademed male deity standing to left, nimbate and radiate; he wears tunic and mantle and short boots; makes a peculiar two-fingered hand gesture; is armed with short sword at left hip and one variant carries a knobbed staff (Rosenfield 1967: 81). On Huviška's issues he faces right, holds a sword or *anikuśa* in the left hand, a torque in the right, has a radiate halo and is dressed in tunic, short boots and mantle (*ibid.*). The same iconography appears with the corresponding Greek legend ΗΕΛΙΟΚ.

As Monneret de Villard (1948) hypothesizes and Göbl (1960) partly demonstrates, the Kushan coinage is derived from Roman models and technical traditions, in the same way as the Gandharan engraved gems of the Kushan age are derived from Roman gems (cf. Callieri, in press b). The iconography of Miuro on Kushan coins seems to have its origin in the type appearing on the reverse of some coins of Antoninus Pius (Mattingly 1940: 84, pl. 12.17, 269, pl. 40.11; Robertson 1971: 207, pl. 52.149; cf. also Evans 1930: 236) with a radiate personage, wearing military uniform and cloak, standing to the left holding branch and spear. The personage is identified with Antoninus mainly because the type was issued by the mint of Rome, which extended images of the emperor also to the coin reverses. The presence of the radiate nimbus, however, suggests the possibility that the type on the Antoninus coins may represent the emperor as Sol (cf. L'Orange 1958: 494 and fig. 670). The element characterizing the Western iconography of the sun god is, in fact, the radiate nimbus, which we see also in the later, slightly different, types on the reverse of coins minted in Asia (type of Marcus Aurelius from Pessinus, Wroth 1899: 20, no. 13, pl. IV. 6) or at Alexandria (type of Commodus, Dattari 1901: 259, no. 3839, pl. XIII). Their identification as images of the god is clearer, as it is in the busts of the Sun usually at the proper right of Mithras in the Western Mithraic reliefs (Vermaseren 1956: figs. 91, 98, 102, 106, 115, 122, 123, 169, 179, 181, 191, 205). On the Roman seals, the images of Sol (cf. e.g. Sena Chiesa 1966: 115, pl. IV. 73-80; Zwierlein-Diehl 1979: 1165-66, pls. 112-14) derive from the coin types of Septimius Severus, where the god, with radiate crown, is naked (Mattingly 1950: 153-54, 464, 544, 304, pls. 10.20, 11.20, 19.17, 73.1).

Our theory on the origin of the iconography of Miiro, seems to be confirmed by the similarity of the Antoninus type with another type appearing on the reverse of coins of Hadrian minted in Asia (Mattingly 1939: 388, pl. 73.3) and representing a similar figure having however a crescent instead of the radiate nimbus. This image, seen on coins minted in Asia, has been identified as the deity Lunus-Mên, whose cult was popular in Roman Asia (cf. Krzyżanowska 1966), and it is likely to be the model for the Kushan Mao (cf. also Lane 1990: 2170). Its relation to Sol is similar to that between Mao and Miiro on the Kushan coins.

In India, however, the solar deity *par excellence* is Sūrya: his iconography has nothing in common with that of Miiro, even though its development falls into a period later than the mature Kushan age. The first anthropomorphic representations of the Indian sun god may go back to the Śuṅga period where they are characterized by the presence of the chariot, on which the god sits or stands (cf. Gail 1978: 336; Pandey 1989: 56-61, 70-80). Their origin has been considered by Banerjea to derive from Western models (Banerjea 1956: 438), even though the connection with the Vedic texts is also evident. In the Kushan period the images of Sūrya begin to have some of the attributes that later become canonical, such as the halo, the lotus and particularly the 'Kushan' boots (cf. Pandey 1989: 81-92). A definite canonical iconography of Sūrya, however, appears only in the Gupta period, characterized by the boots, the lotus and the high tiara; the chariot, on the other hand, becomes rare or is often represented by seven small horses at the foot of the image or stele (Pandey 1971: 66-88; Pandey 1989: 100-108). This iconography is common in the post-Gupta art of the Hindu Śāhis (cf. Bernard & Grenet 1981) and particularly in the art of Kashmir (cf. Pal 1975: 80-82, nos. 16, 17; Paul 1986: 124-27), a region where devotion to the sun god is shown by the great temple at Martand and where the post-Gupta iconography of Sūrya probably took shape. While for the Western iconography of the sun god the radiate nimbus is the characteristic element, in the iconography of Sūrya the constant is the presence of the foreign trait of the boots, which however are not referred to in the Puranic texts, according to which Sūrya is to be represented only from the knees upwards (cf. Pandey 1971: 183; Pandey 1989: 54-56). The boots are attributes of the Kushan kings we know from the coin obverses and from the statues of Māt, and the habitual presence of this alien element has a special significance. According to Rosenfield (1967: 190-97) the images of Sūrya were derived from Kushan royal portraits, and were linked with the ideology of the divine kingship, or better, to the conception of the king as *cakravartin* (cf. Verardi 1983: 261-65). Thus the lack of similarity between the Kushan images of Miiro/Helios and those of Sūrya is explained by their belonging to two different iconographic traditions as well as to two different artistic media (cf. also Monneret de Villard 1948: 230 ff.).

The iconography of Sūrya as developed in Northern India from the Kushan period never appears in the Kushan coins but is common in sculpture in stone and terracotta (cf. Combaz 1937: 131-91; Pandey 1971; Gail 1978; Pandey 1989). On the coins, on the other hand, the solar deity is always Miiro/Helios, whose iconography is of

manifestly Western origin. It is interesting to note that the iconography of Miïro as that of Sūrya has its roots in the image of an emperor.

For the presence and diffusion of a Western solar iconography in the Kushan Northwest, we can, in addition to the numismatic evidence, add evidence from Gandharan art. Among the finds from the IsMEO excavations at Butkara, in Swat, is a circular medallion in schist (belonging to the turban of a *Bodhisattva* statue? cf. e.g. Rowland 1938: pl. VII, fig. 7), representing, in the centre of an open flower, the bust of a radiate figure holding a staff. This image was rightly linked with Syrian influences and particularly with Palmyra (Taddei 1966: 85-86), where the images of the solar deities Šamaš, Yarhibôl and Malakbêl are characterized by the same traits (cf. Drijvers 1976: 11-13, pls. III, IX, XVI, XVII, XXI-XXIII, XXXIV-XXXVII, L.2; Teixidor 1979: 29 ff., 47, pls. VIII, X), which we have already found at Hatra (cf. *supra*). A small bronze medallion of the Heliopolitan cult, from the Beqa, in Beirut Museum (Seyrig 1971: 367-70, fig. 6.4), of uncertain function (token?), is perhaps the best comparison for the iconographic scheme of the bust of the sun god within a roundel.

The Butkara medallion has no specific relationship with our seal in the British Museum but shows that in the Northwest of the Indian subcontinent, the Western iconography of the sun god with lance within a radiate nimbus was not unknown and may have also influenced other images, even less connected with the original 'model' not only iconographically but also iconologically. Thus the bust of the sun god within a radiate nimbus on the right of the image of the king on the so-called 'Kaniška casket' from Shāh-jī-kī-dherī (cf. Dobbins 1968: figs. 7-8; Fussman 1987: 77-82) is still within the original semantic field, in its broader sense, but a stucco medallion from Haḍḍa representing a figure (deity?) with lance and bowl within a roundel (halo?) (Barthoux 1930: pl. 97e), tentatively identified as a pilgrim (cf. Gullini, ed., 1961: 129, pl. XXXVII), probably offers a mere general iconographic resemblance, even considering the chronological difference between the various objects.

Nearer to our seal in time and, probably, in meaning, is the deity in the central composition of the painted decoration on the vault of the large niche above the 35-metres Buddha at Bāmiyān (Tarzi 1977: 4 ff., pl. A.1) (fig. 9). This deity, which in the past has been identified with Mithra (cf. Rowland 1938, 1974: 86-87; cf. also Klimburg-Salter 1988), stands frontally on the chariot, within a 'flaming' halo. He wears a belted tunic, a mantle secured on the chest by a buckle, and two necklaces: one along the neckline of the tunic, the other, longer, with a pendant; he is haloed and from the shoulders are two undulating ribbons. With the right hand he holds a lance, the left is on the sword handle at the waist. The similarity of this image to that on our seal in the British Museum is remarkable, not only in the general scheme but even in such details as the necklaces or the right hand holding the lance. A substantial difference, however, lies in the large halo entirely encircling the figure, which is not radiate but 'flaming' as on some Gandharan Buddhas and Bodhisattvas.

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Fig. 9 - Bâmiyân, 35-metres Buddha: painted image of the Sun-god on the ceiling of the main niche (after Tarzi 1977).

As regards the diffusion of the Mithra cult in the Kušānšahr, Soper has put forward the theory of a Kushan royal myth imitating that of Mithra (Soper 1949-50: 270-72). On that basis Soper identifies the images on the obverse of the coins of Vima, Kaniška and Huviška, where the bust of the king emerges from clouds or rocks, as the images of the king on mount Harā, the residence of Mithra (*ibid.*: 270). However stimulating, this theory does not seem to be soundly based and has already been adequately criticized (cf. Rosenfield 1967: 192-93, fn. 61). There are no other strong evidences of the predominance of Mithra as such among the deities of the Kushan pantheon (*ibid.*)<sup>(8)</sup>.

<sup>(8)</sup> Humbach has advanced the theory that the monograms at the end of the Bactrian inscription of Surkh Kotal should be read as *deioo* 'god' and *Miuro* 'Mithra' (Humbach 1960; 1975: 138, fn. 12). The other readings, however, do not support this interpretation, which in the final report of the Surkh Kotal excavation has not even been taken into consideration (Schlumberger et al. 1983: 144-52).



Martha L. Carter, in her study on the diffusion of the imagery of the sun god in the Kushano-Sasanian age (1981), proposes to identify Mithra on the coins of the Kušānšāhān and advances the hypothesis that the Kušānšāhān had recognized the popular supremacy of the sun god, Mithra (1981: 97). A similar opinion is noticeable in the works of V.G. Lukonin, who stresses the presence of Mithra in the investiture scenes of the Kushano-Sasanian coins (Lukonin 1967: 26, 1969: 145 ff.).

The possibility that our seal was found in the Northwest of the Indian subcontinent, Kušānšāhr proper, seems therefore particularly important. It is at present impossible to define a Kushano-Sasanian glyptic art distinct from that of Sasanian Iran (cf. Callieri, in press a). Our seal therefore could belong to either of the two areas. In both cases, it represents one of the few images of Mithra in Iranian art, which, though possibly an exception to the widespread and probably esoteric aniconism, nevertheless throws light on the complex religious world of ancient Iran.

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